

Using Technology Tools to



Encourage Reluctant Writers



Recently I reflected on the scary things that confront me, such as bad drivers, spiders, snarling dogs, and the blinking cursor on the blank computer screen. For me, the blinking cursor is the scariest of all. The cursor sits there expectantly and waits for the movement of my words to propel it across the preset margins. It pulsates. It must be satiated.

“Writing is an expedition into the unknown that we embark on to develop our thoughts and feelings,” writes John Barell in *Developing More Curious Minds*. The unknown is scary, so why would anyone want to embark on such an expedition and write? People write because writing is essential. It is an integral component of success in school and life after school.

The technology in our classrooms can encourage even the most reluctant writers to flourish and publish without perishing. Here are a few strategies designed to utilize technology to encourage even the most reluctant writers in your classroom.

1. Change the Audience

Anticipating an audience reaction is one of the keys to writing success. In most classrooms, teachers are the audience and, unfortunately, some kids are not impressed with us (we represent a time before DSL, DVD, and MTV!). Spending hours or even minutes writing for an audience of one is tantamount to painting the garage. A small audience equals a small investment of time. But if you change the audience, student interest increases.

“Kids will work harder for an authentic audience than they will for a grade,” says Alan November, educator and futurist. Every writing assignment should have an anticipated audience in mind. Just as we delineate the subject, scope, and guidelines for an assignment, we should also communicate the intended audience. Published works can be displayed and read at PTA meetings, open houses, school board meetings, over-the-school public address systems, or on closed-circuit television. Writing products can be assembled into a classroom anthology and sold as a fund-raising project. These anthologies can also be delivered to local nursing homes, children’s hospitals, and day-care centers.

The Internet offers opportunities for a huge audience reception. Online portfolios offer ways for students to publish their writing, solicit comments, and republish their edited work. A teacher’s Web site can showcase a Writer of the Week.

Alan November recommends a Web site for secondary students called Fan Fiction. Here members can submit stories, read and react to the stories of other members, and communicate with other authors and readers through forums and chat rooms. For younger writers up to age 13, the KidPub Web site has published over 42,000 stories from students around the world.

Fan Fiction
<http://www.fanfiction.net>

KidPub
<http://www.kidpub.org/kidpub/>

Another inventive approach is to ask a local writers’ club to accept story or essay contributions as their club activity once during the school year. Stories may be printed and delivered or emailed to the club historian. When the essays are evaluated,

they are delivered back to the teacher to preview before returning to students. Students may then have the option to revise and resubmit their stories to the writing club.

Students need to believe that their work won’t end up as just another grade in your gradebook. An expanded audience offers the practical application of class time to the real-world arena of constructive criticism and product submission.

2. Provide Time

Set aside a structured class time of at least 15 minutes every day for free writing or response writing. If a blank screen is too intimidating, invite students to change the background color of their files. In most word processing programs, this option is under the Format menu, then choose Background. Let students experiment with different font styles, sizes, and colors to customize their writing space.

During structured writing time, write alongside your students. At one time, I would use student-writing time to catch up on my classroom housekeeping chores. I would scurry around and water plants, update calendars, post announcements, and adjust the thermostat. And I would wonder why my students kept bothering me as I did my chores!

Then one day I got it. I understood that students don’t want to write when they perceive it as busy work. They will model what their teacher does. So I booted up the computer and opened a word processing file. I put my name in the header and changed the background color to salmon and the font and color to Garamond, Blue. As I began to journey into the unknown valley of words, my students settled down. “I don’t want to disturb you,” one young man said, “you seem so caught up in what you are doing.”

Third grade teacher Mary White from Tahlequah, Oklahoma, tells about a colleague who writes his own essays while his students write theirs. He involves his students in his writing process. He reads his paper and describes the thought processes he employs in word and sentence choices. He involves his students in discussions over which word or phrase he should use. After modeling in this way for students, he often asks them to discuss their own writing samples. Why did they choose this particular phrase or that metaphor? How can they describe objects with greater clarity? “*Metacognition*, or thinking about thinking, was one of my favorite words in graduate school,” White recalls, “but my colleague really puts it into practice.”

3. Encourage Electronic Journal-Writing

It used to be that the main drawback to journal-writing was volume. I remember the ecstasy of keeping a journal, but the agony of toting back and forth all those spiral notebooks. Now, with word processors, students can key their responses in files on disks or on shared folders as electronic journals (e-journals). They may email their e-journal files to me, or they can hand me their disks.

In his book *The First Days of School*, education consultant and former elementary teacher Harry Wong advises that every class period should begin with a warm-up activity. E-journals are

perfect for warming up those writing muscles. After taking attendance, I join students in finishing the warm-up writing prompt. For about 10 minutes, we are all tapping away on the keys, pushing the blinking cursor beyond its anticipation point. It is great to start class as a group working toward a shared goal. If your classroom has 1–4 machines, group them as a writing center. Instruct students to write in longhand and transcribe their thoughts in the writing center as the day progresses. The first students to arrive use the writing center first, which is a great motivation to come to class early!

The flexibility and accessibility of e-journals make them perfect tools to hold warm-up writing, pop quizzes, sudden epiphanies, or closure comments. As a variation on e-journals, you and your students can begin an electronic gratitude journal during this Thanksgiving month and continue it weekly. Fifth grade teacher Jan Purnell of Littlestown, Pennsylvania, has already done the work of setting up gratitude journals. Her Web page contains writing prompts, handouts, and great resources for students.

Gratitude Journals

<http://www.geocities.com/EnchantedForest/Mountain/9112/GratJourn/Gratitude.html>

4. Provide Options

Everyday routines do not require creativity and ingenuity. Creativity is unstructured and random. To spur creativity and erase routine, supply budding writers with a “text and tech” assortment of writing tools. Some students are naturally prone to creative thought. Pair these students with more linear-thinking students. An easy way to tell the abstract, random writers from the concrete, sequential writers is to watch what writing tools they choose. Traditionalists may prefer pen and paper. Let them experiment with color cards, graffiti walls, overhead transparencies, and puzzle pieces.

Concrete, sequential students love the structure of spreadsheet programs. Use a spreadsheet or Table feature in a word processing program to create “Captain’s Logs.” Captain’s Logs are handy reference word lists such as synonyms, SAT words, and hard-to-spell words. Captain’s Logs can be created by using a 4 x 4 table and the Thesaurus feature in word processing software, a thesaurus book, or reference Web site.

Students can use AutoShape callouts to supply dialogue, thoughts of historical figures, current world leaders, characters, animals, etc. AutoShape callouts are usually found in the Insert menu, Picture submenu. To utilize callouts, write a key concept or name on the white board. Students can use an AutoShape rectangle to copy this word or phrase and choose the callout to add their thoughts. They can use the line tool to connect to smaller rectangles with details as they create mindmaps. Prompt students to increase the size or “grow” words of importance or words pertaining to your topic, and decrease the size or “shrink” filler words for eye variety. Inspiration or Kidspiration software is also great for this type of activity.

Inspiration Software

<http://www.inspiration.com>

A picture can definitely yield a thousand words, and they aid in what Barell calls the “power of reflection.” Utilize your word processing program to display a portrait or group scene. The Kodak Web site is a great source for pictures; click on Today’s Picture, then click on Browse PhotoQuilt. If you’re looking for a newsworthy photo, visit the United Press International Web site, which maintains an archive of 100,000+ images, and adds 1200

more images each month. Younger students will enjoy the pictorial dictionary at Picture Dictionary.

Kodak

<http://www.kodak.com>

United Press International

<http://www.upi.com/photos/index.cfm>

Picture Dictionary

<http://www.pdictionary.com/>

Vary your students’ options for production output. Instead of predictable printouts on white paper, use printable transparencies. Students can key their copy, then spellcheck, edit, revise, and resave. They print their copy on the transparencies, then add color from highlighters or markers, and cut their finished products into interesting shapes. The resulting shapes are fun to position and reposition on the overhead projector. By knowing their products ahead of time, students can craft their writing to short sentences with active voice.

Some student writers complain that they don’t have anything to say. I once gave the e-journal prompt, “How was Winston Churchill responsible for the victories of the allies during World War II?” My student Ricky responded, “Lots.” I said, “You must respond in a complete sentence,” satisfied that I had spurred the reluctant writer within Ricky. After a while, he turned in a print-out that said, “Winston Churchill did lots.” (It was, after all, a complete sentence.)

I asked Ricky to explain what he meant by “lots.” He gave a cogent discourse with many examples. I wrote down what he said as he said it. I observed that day that Ricky was a great speaker and a reluctant writer. As long as he talked through an essay, his word fluency increased. So, I gathered my microphones, headphones, and tape recorders, and formed a mini-classroom recording center. Students enter this center to talk through e-journal prompts, record a story or poem, or practice pronunciation. Students play their sound recordings and transcribe their copy. Working alone or with a peer, they can edit their writing and make final revisions.

The Candlelight Stories Web site displays story text for students to read and then record observations. Giggle Poetry, Dr. Seuss’s Seussville, and author Jan Brett’s homepage all have fun, short poems for reading and response.

Candlelight Stories

<http://www.candlelightstories.com>

Giggle Poetry

<http://www.gigglepoetry.com>

Seussville

<http://www.seussville.com/seussville/>

Jan Brett

<http://www.janbrett.com/>

Students can hear the pronunciation of words in short audio clips at Merriam-Webster Online. This is especially helpful for students with limited language experience. And the Google search engine has a translation section under its Language Tools feature that translates from English to other languages and vice versa.

Merriam-Webster Online

<http://www.m-w.com>

Google

<http://www.google.com>

You can bring the fun of the recording center to the whole group setting. Find an audio clip to play of a song, speech, or recent

broadcast. Instruct students to key from memory as much as they remember of what you played. Play the selection again and have them revise and re-key, as necessary. Students again compare their dictation skills, either alone or with a peer, and revise their copy. They can write about their impressions of the audio clip or add a paragraph or two of extension. This activity is also fun with folk songs or oldies. Good Internet sources for audio clips include the National Public Radio archives of real-time broadcasts and the Public Broadcast System's audio clips of American speeches.

NPR Archives

<http://www.npr.org/>

PBS's Great American Speech Archive

<http://www.pbs.org/greatspeeches/timeline/index.html>

By following the cycle of writing, revising, and reworking, students become proficient in practice. The structure of the writing cycle lets students practice their growing skills. The Paradigm Online Writing Assistant site is an interactive, online writing guide with discussions and activities to practice the writing cycle sequence. Its author Chuck Guilford teaches composition, creative writing, and literature at Boise State University. Topics include "Discovering What to Write," "Organizing Your Writing," "Editing Your Writing," and "Documenting Your Sources." When students have a variety of topics, it takes both the fear and monotony out of writing and makes writing a fun word game.

Paradigm Online Writing Assistant

<http://www.powa.org>

5. Embellish and Entertain

Would you rather be an *anagram* or an *isogram*? Just as it is impossible to keep your eyes open during a sneeze, it is impossible to get "writer's stuck" when playing word games and accessing word game Web sites. Ross Eckler calls this "reloading the word matrix." His book *Making the Alphabet Dance: Recreational Wordplay* contains interesting word games and etymology activities. The goal is to relax and have fun with words and all their uses as descriptors, explainers, storytellers, communicators, innovators, and illuminators.

The ReadWriteThink Web site (by the International Reading Association, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the MarcoPolo Education Foundation) offers tutorials, lessons, and fun approaches to writing. The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory has easy-to-implement ideas and lesson plans. Use the activities at Quia to practice grammar concepts, parts of speech, and vocabulary. Grammar Gorillas is an old favorite of students across the grade levels. Its easy practice style is great for review and reteaching.

ReadWriteThink

<http://www.readwritethink.org/about.html>

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

<http://www.nwrel.org/assessment/department.asp?d=1>

Quia

<http://www.quia.com>

Grammar Gorillas

<http://www.funbrain.com/grammar/>

Once the writing process becomes fun and fluency is optimized, students can progress through the curriculum of writing products. Students can establish thesis statements, integrate

quotations and citations into written text, compose a technical writing sample document, publish their writing online, write responses to literature, and write analysis papers.

Technology enlivens writing practice. Software features boost word fluency. Web sites encourage just-in-time publishing. The ultimate goal is for students to write for their own satisfaction, but first they must get through the production curve and quickly feel the satisfaction of completing the task. By considering audience, time, options, e-journaling, and entertainment, your classroom can gently transform the reluctant writer into a master wordsmith.

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